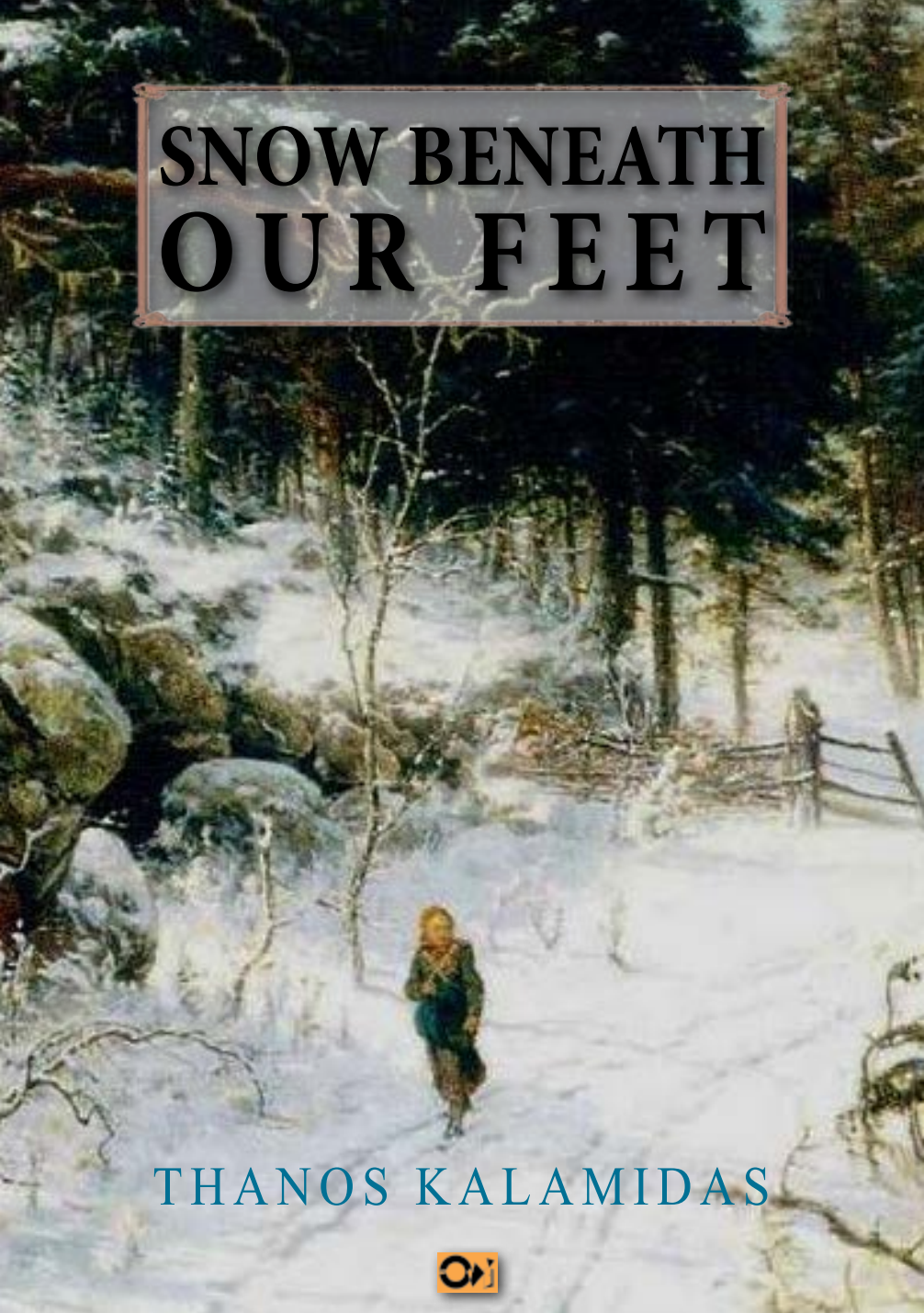
SNOW BENEATH OUR FEET



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Thanos Kalamidas

Snow beneath our feet

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The snow came without warning. Not like in Lagos, where rain announced itself with thunder and the smell of earth rising from hot pavement. In Seinäjoki, it arrived silently, like a secret, or a decision made long ago. It fell in slow, steady flakes that coated the rooftops, the bare branches, and the narrow roads leading out of town. It fell without asking permission.

Kemi stood by the window of their small second-floor apartment, arms folded tight across her chest. The radiator hissed weakly behind her, a poor substitute for the sun she hadn't seen in twelve days.

"I didn't think it would come so early," she murmured.

Ayo glanced up from the box he was unpacking, one of many still scattered around the living room. He followed her gaze outside. The white sky had no depth, no end. It pressed down on the town like a ceiling.

"Maybe it's just a little dusting," he said, trying for optimism. "Gone by morning."

But it wasn't.

By morning, it had thickened. The streets were muffled. The cars moved slower, the people even slower. And the silence, it wasn't peace. It was something else. Something colder.

That first day, no one spoke to them in the stairwell. Their neighbour, a tall man with a silver beard and a keychain that jangled like sleigh bells, passed them without eye contact.

Kemi smiled. "Hei," she offered. Cheerful. Clear.

The man barely nodded, his boots squeaking as he continued down the stairs.

In Lagos, even strangers commented on your hairstyle, your shoes, your mood. Here, people guarded their words like currency.

That night, Kemi said it aloud.

"It's too quiet."

Ayo sat at the small kitchen table, his hands wrapped around a mug of instant coffee. He looked at her, then at the frost blooming on the window glass.

"It's winter," he said.

"No," she replied, her voice low, distant. "It's something else."

He didn't understand. Not yet.

* * * * * *

By their second year, the quiet had become a second skin. Smooth on the outside, but itchy underneath.

Tobi stopped trying to make friends at school. He walked home with his hood up, lips pressed into a line. He'd learned how to laugh at jokes not meant for him, and how to shrink himself in gym class so no one would notice if he wasn't picked.

Dami still danced to Afrobeats in the living room, spinning and stomping until the neighbours knocked on the ceiling with a broom. "We can hear everything," they once said. But she danced anyway,

some nights with tears in her eyes.

And Kemi, she grew stiller. She kept her smile in place at the grocery store while another customer skipped her in line. She watched the teachers' meetings where her voice felt like a foreign object in the room, too loud, too accented, too inconvenient.

Silence met them everywhere. Not the kind born of calm, but of absence. Of something withheld. It was the way people looked past them in the bank queue, how no one offered them seats at the town meetings, how colleagues never asked Ayo about his weekend.

It was the way no one ever said the word *black*, but made sure they never forgot it.

* * * * * *

Four winters had passed now.

The snow still fell. It still blanketed everything like an alibi.

Kemi stared out the window once again, her forehead resting against the cool pane. Below, Tobi and Dami shuffled along the sidewalk, their hats pulled low, their backpacks too big on their shoulders. A woman across the street was pulling her child gently away whispering something Kemi couldn't

hear but didn't need to.

"They think silence is harmless," she whispered. "But it isn't. It's just a softer kind of violence."

Behind her, Ayo stood quietly. He'd heard. He didn't argue anymore.

In Seinäjoki, the snow was always white. Always soft. But beneath it, something darker had taken root.

And spring, it seemed, would never come.

Chapter One
The Colour of Snow

It was a Wednesday when Kemi got the call.

She had just come in from scraping ice off the balcony railing, her fingers still red from the cold that sliced through even the thickest gloves. The phone rang on the kitchen counter, its shrill tone jarring in a home where no one raised their voice anymore.

She answered on the second ring.

“Mrs. Adeyemi?” said the voice in Finnish-accented English. Female, clipped. “This is Merja from Seinäjoki Yläkoulu. I’m calling about Tobi.”

Kemi’s back straightened. She placed the kettle gently on the stove and turned the gas on low. “Yes? Is everything okay?”

"Well…" A pause, pregnant with polite unease. "There was an incident during recess. A conflict with another student. We'd like you to come in tomorrow to discuss it with the vice-principal and class counsellor."

Kemi's stomach dropped. "What happened?"

"It would be better to go through the details in person. We want to support Tobi, of course. But we have to address... behavioural concerns."

Kemi's mouth went dry. "He's never been in trouble before."

"Still. It's best to talk."

Click.

The call ended without a goodbye.

* * * * * *

That night, at dinner, the four of them sat around the table. Kemi kept her voice calm.

"Tobi, what happened at school today?"

He kept his eyes on his plate. Mashed potatoes. Reindeer meatballs he wouldn't touch. "Nothing."

Kemi exchanged a glance with Ayo.

“The school called,” she said.

Now Tobi looked up. His cheeks burned dark against his skin. “They’re lying.”

“Tobi...” Ayo’s voice had weight. He didn’t shout, but when he used that tone, things usually stopped moving.

“I didn’t do anything!” Tobi snapped. “Saku pushed me. I just pushed back.”

“Who’s Saku?” Kemi asked, quietly.

“A boy,” Dami said. “The one who calls him ‘Tarzan’ sometimes.”

Tobi dropped his fork. It clattered against the plate. “He said I looked angry. That I was ‘scary.’”

“And what did you do?” Ayo asked.

“I walked away.”

“Did you shout?”

“No.”

“Did you hit him?”

"No!" Tobi shouted, finally letting the rage spill. "But he's white. I'm not. So I'm scary no matter what I do."

The words hovered in the air, too heavy to move. Kemi reached across the table and touched his hand. It trembled under her palm.

"You are not scary," she said. "You are seen that way because they don't know how to see you as anything else. That is not your fault."

Tobi pulled his hand away and stood, eyes glistening.

"They don't want to know me," he said. "They just want me to disappear."

And then he was gone, the bedroom door closing softly behind him.

* * * * * *

The next day, Kemi put on her best coat, the one with the fur trim that made her feel stronger. She brushed her hair back into a tight bun, applied a modest line of eyeliner, and left the house with her shoulders squared.

At the school, she was led into a glass-walled room with plastic chairs and laminated posters about empathy in Finnish. A thin woman with cropped blond hair introduced herself as the counsellor. Another man, gray-suited and unsmiling, introduced himself as the vice-principal.

They began with words like *concern* and *emotional safety*, circling the issue like vultures afraid to land.

Finally, Kemi leaned forward, her hands folded tightly in her lap.

"Are you saying my son attacked someone?"

"No," said the counsellor, looking down. "But he was... confrontational. His posture. His expression. The other student felt threatened."

Kemi blinked slowly. "So... he *looked* threatening."

The vice-principal adjusted his glasses. "We have to take these perceptions seriously."

Kemi's voice dropped to a whisper, tight with fury. "Even when they are based on nothing but skin colour?"

Silence.

The woman shifted in her chair. "We're not accusing him of anything malicious. But students must learn to manage their presence, how they appear to others. Especially when emotions are involved."

Kemi felt a deep chill settle in her spine, colder than any Seinäjoki winter.

"And who teaches the other students," she asked, "to manage their *assumptions*?"

Neither of them answered.

* * * * * *

Later that day, she stood alone outside the school building, watching children spill out into the snow-covered yard. Laughter echoed around her, high-pitched and fleeting. Tobi walked out with his hood up, shoulders hunched. She walked toward him, slow and steady.

"Let's go home," she said softly.

He didn't speak, but he nodded.

As they passed the school gates, a blond boy behind them whispered, just loud enough to be heard:

"Angry boy walks like a gorilla."

Kemi stopped walking.

Tobi's hand clenched in hers.

She turned.

The boy and his friend froze. Their eyes wide, pupils shrinking like prey.

Kemi said nothing. She only looked, long enough to make them squirm, short enough not to give them power.

She turned back around.

"We are not small," she said to Tobi.

He didn't respond, but for the first time in weeks, he didn't let go of her hand.

Chapter Two
The Geography of Whispers

It started with small things. A sideways glance. A pause in conversation when Ayo entered the office kitchen. A classmate not invited to a birthday party. In Lagos, they had learned to listen for what was said. In Seinäjoki, they learned to listen for what wasn't.

Ayo first noticed it during the Monday team meeting at the city engineering office.

They were going around the table, sharing updates. His Finnish had improved, enough to catch context and tone. He'd rehearsed his section all weekend: clear, concise, accurate.

When it was his turn, he spoke carefully. “I’ve finalized the terrain data for the tunnel projection. The topographical overlay shows minimal risk of subsoil freeze. I also created an alternate route in case...”

“Hyvä,” his boss interrupted. “Thanks, Ayo. Moving on, Juha, you had an update on the procurement file?”

Just like that. Two sentences, no discussion. Like a box ticked.

Later, in the kitchenette, Ayo tried again.

“Did you see the mapping output? The alternate line bypasses the drainage slope. Could save excavation costs.”

Juha nodded slowly, staring into his yogurt. “Yeah. We’ll see what Erik thinks.”

“But I thought we all agreed...”

Juha shrugged. “Erik decides.”

He left his spoon in the sink, yogurt still clinging to the sides.

* * * * * *

At the grocery store, Kemi handed over exact change to the cashier and smiled. The woman, young and tense, dropped the coins back with gloved fingers, never touching Kemi's palm.

Behind her, a man in line gave a small, involuntary scoff.

"I'm sorry?" Kemi turned.

He looked down. Then up again, his eyes flat. "Nothing."

"No," she said, louder this time. "You said something."

The man blinked, then smirked. "Just wondering how long the line gets when people don't know how things work here."

Kemi felt her throat tighten.

The cashier looked anywhere but at her.

"I've lived here for four years," Kemi said, her accent sharpening. "I speak the language. I work. I raise children who speak your language better than you do."

The man grunted. “Sure. But your kids will never really fit in. That’s not something you can teach.”

Kemi left the groceries on the counter. She walked out into the biting wind, her coat still unzipped, heart pounding so loud she couldn’t hear anything else.

* * * * * *

At school, Dami had started asking strange questions.

“Mummy,” she said one night, curled beside Kemi on the couch, “what’s a ‘clean African’?”

Kemi’s body stiffened. “Where did you hear that?”

“Maria said it. She said I’m one of the clean ones. Because I don’t smell like goat and I wear nice clothes.”

Ayo dropped the book he was reading.

Kemi breathed slowly, too afraid of what would come out if she spoke too fast.

“And what did you say?”

Dami looked confused. “I just said thank you.”

Kemi felt her eyes sting.

"No, baby. That's not a compliment. That's her way of saying you don't belong. That she thinks Africa is dirty. That we are dirty."

Dami's face fell. "But I'm Finnish too."

"You are. And Nigerian. Both. They can't take that from you."

Dami leaned into her mother's shoulder. "But I don't think they want me to be both."

* * * * * *

The church had been their sanctuary. A small Lutheran congregation with kind eyes and bitter coffee.

But even there, things had shifted.

During coffee hour, the older women praised Dami's "good hair," and asked if it was "natural this time."

Another said to Kemi, "You're so brave to raise kids here. With all that's going on in… you know."

"In where?" Kemi asked.

The woman blinked. "Africa."

Ayo, beside her, clenched his cup so hard it cracked.

"I'm from Nigeria," Kemi said. "Not 'Africa.' Nigeria is a country. A big one."

The woman flushed. "Of course. I didn't mean..."

"You did," Ayo said quietly.

* * * * * *

That night, they sat on the balcony wrapped in blankets, watching the snow fall like ash.

"I thought things would be better by now," Kemi said. "Four years. We work. We're polite. We try."

Ayo didn't speak.

She turned toward him. "Say something."

He exhaled. "They like us quiet. And grateful. They don't know what to do when we push back."

"But how long can we shrink?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to teach my son how to disappear."

The silence stretched.

Then Ayo added, “But I also don’t want him to be broken by shouting into a room that never listens.”

Kemi pulled the blanket tighter.

“The worst part,” she whispered, “is that I still believe in this place. Or I want to.”

Ayo looked out into the white horizon.

“They think this land belongs only to them,” he said. “But snow covers everything. Doesn’t care what’s underneath.”

Chapter Three
The Smell of Smoke

They had never seen Ayo shout before.

It happened in March, during the third straight week of silent treatment at his office. His project files had been reassigned. His ideas ignored. His lunch stolen from the fridge for the second time in four days.

And that morning, his manager Erik walked past his desk and said, flatly, “Don’t worry about Friday’s briefing. Juha will cover it.”

Ayo stood up so fast his chair hit the floor behind him. His voice, when it came, wasn’t loud but it was razor sharp.

"Why?"

Erik blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I submitted the report. I've spent a month building the data."

Erik glanced around. "This isn't the time."

"I've never raised my voice in this office. I've never missed a deadline. But it doesn't matter, does it? You hear my accent, you see my skin, and you assume I need someone to *cover* for me."

Erik's lips tightened. "Let's talk in private."

"I've been *private* for four years," Ayo said. "Now I want witnesses."

The whole room had gone quiet.

Erik stepped closer, lowering his voice. "People are uncomfortable, Ayo. They say you're hard to talk to. Unapproachable."

Ayo laughed, bitterly. "Because I don't laugh at racist jokes? Or pretend Juha's ideas are new when I brought them up last week?"

Erik's eyes hardened. "Maybe this isn't the best fit for you."

That night, Ayo came home late. He sat in the car for nearly twenty minutes before entering the apartment.

“I think I’m quitting,” he told Kemi.

She didn’t argue. She just poured him a cup of tea.

* * * * * *

At school, Tobi had stopped talking.

Not just to classmates, at home, too. He stayed in his room for hours, playing music with headphones or sketching in a notebook he wouldn’t let anyone see.

When Kemi brought him dinner, he looked up.

“I got a detention,” he said.

She sat on the edge of his bed, careful not to touch the frayed corners of his world.

“What for?”

“I didn’t say anything. I just didn’t laugh when the others were making fun of this Somali boy in class.”

Kemi swallowed.

"They said I was being aggressive. Because I stared too long. Just... stared."

He finally looked at her. "If I speak, I'm angry. If I'm quiet, I'm threatening. What do they want me to be?"

She didn't answer.

He pushed the plate away. "Maybe I should just start shouting. If I'm going to be hated anyway, I might as well earn it."

"No," Kemi said. "That's what they want."

"They want silence," he snapped.

"They want *submission*," she corrected. "Silence is ours. It's a weapon too."

* * * * * *

Dami came home in tears one afternoon. Her pink backpack streaked with black marker—words she refused to say aloud.

She handed it to Kemi and ran to the bathroom.

On the fabric were three thick words:

“Go Back Jungle.”

Kemi stood in the kitchen, backpack in hand, her knees shaking.

That night, she and Ayo called the school. The counsellor listened politely, promised an investigation. Nothing more.

The next morning, Dami refused to get dressed.

“I’m not going,” she said, lying flat on the living room floor in her pyjamas.

Kemi knelt beside her.

“You have to.”

Dami stared at the ceiling. “Why? So they can write on my skin next?”

Kemi blinked. “What?”

“They looked at me today like they wanted to. Like the bag wasn’t enough.”

She began to cry.

“I don’t know how to be invisible like you and Daddy.”

Kemi didn't answer. She just lay beside her daughter on the floor, the two of them staring up at the cracked ceiling light, where a moth kept circling.

* * * * * *

Two days later, the apartment next door caught fire.

They woke to smoke in the stairwell and sirens outside. Kemi grabbed both children, shoved shoes onto bare feet, and rushed them down four flights into the freezing dark.

Outside, neighbours gathered in clusters. A few stood alone. No one approached them.

The fire was contained before it reached their apartment, but the hall smelled of char and wet drywall.

They stayed with a Ghanaian friend across town that night. Kemi sat in the kitchen, wrapping Dami in a borrowed fleece blanket.

"They don't see us," she whispered. "Not until something burns."

Ayo stood at the window, watching ash fall on frozen streets.

"Then maybe we set the fire ourselves," he said.

Kemi looked up. "You mean leave?"

"No," he said. "I mean stop waiting to be accepted. Stop behaving."

She shook her head. "And what would that look like?"

He turned.

"Speaking up. Writing it down. Bringing others. If they want us to be silent, then let's be loud enough to rattle their windows."

Kemi studied him for a long time. Then she said, "Okay."

Chapter Four
The Sound of Our Names

At first, it was just a letter.

Kemi wrote it after another sleepless night, her thoughts sparking like wires. She started with a question:

"What happens to the children who are told they don't belong in the only home they've ever known?"

She wrote in Finnish, carefully, so no one could dismiss it as ignorance. She described Dami's backpack. Tobi's silence. Ayo's lost voice at work. Her own tightening chest whenever she walked past the apartment door of the woman who smiled without ever saying hello.

She posted it to the local community page. Then the regional school board. Then the town newspaper.

No one replied.

But the letter was shared. Quietly. Reluctantly.

Three days later, another mother wrote back.

"My daughter is Sami. They told her she looked 'weird' and asked if she lived in a tent. I didn't say anything then. I'm sorry."

Then another.

"My husband is Arab. They won't sit next to him on the bus. We thought it was just us."

A few came in person. An Estonian grandmother with trembling hands. A Filipino nurse with tears in her eyes. A Finnish woman from the next block, face red with shame.

"We didn't know," she said.

"You did," Kemi said gently. "You just didn't *feel* it."

* * * * * *

Ayo gave a radio interview in Finnish. He said the

words slowly, precisely, so no one could pretend they misunderstood.

"We are not guests. We pay taxes. We clear your snow. We raise children who sing your anthems. But we are asked... daily, hourly, to shrink. I will not raise my son to shrink."

The interviewer was silent for a moment, then asked, "Do you think racism is systemic in Finland?"

Ayo answered, "Do you think snow only falls on the houses that deserve it?"

* * * * * *

Then came the backlash.

An anonymous comment: "Go back."

A slashed tire.

An envelope in their mailbox with no return address, just a single word written in red across the flap:

"Rot."

The police said there was nothing they could do without a witness.

Tobi was the one who found it. He didn't say a word. He just handed it to Kemi and went back to his room.

* * * * * *

One morning, they woke to find a dead bird nailed to their apartment door.

Dami screamed.

Kemi unpinned it with shaking fingers, holding the tiny broken body like a question.

They stayed inside that day. Ayo didn't go to work. The children didn't go to school. They sat on the floor in silence, the television playing quietly in the background.

That evening, Ayo stood.

"We need to leave."

Kemi didn't argue. But she asked, "Where?"

He paused.

"Somewhere we're allowed to breathe."

* * * * * *

They found a job offer in Uppsala. Sweden. A university research post. Not engineering, but data analysis. Enough to start over.

The night before they left, Tobi stayed up drawing. He left the notebook open on the table.

Kemi saw it in the morning.

It was a sketch of their building. The trees outside. The grey sky.

And in the foreground, four shadows—featureless, faceless, walking away with only the shape of their backs visible. Above them, he'd written in block letters:

"IF I VANISH, WILL THEY REMEMBER MY NAME?"

* * * * * *

They left in April. The snow was just beginning to melt. Seinäjoki didn't say goodbye.

No neighbours waved.

No teachers called.

At the train station, a gust of wind scattered old papers across the platform.

Dami pressed her face against the window, watching the town slide backward, trees dissolving into blur.

Kemi sat beside her, hands clasped tight.

Ayo stood by the door, staring out at the horizon. He didn't move, not even when the whistle blew.

Tobi wore headphones. He stared at nothing.

As the train pulled away, Seinäjoki faded.

Only the silence remained.

END

Snow beneath our feet

Thanos Kalamidas

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SNOW BENEATH OUR FEET

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THANOS KALAMIDAS